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## **Teachers as Bullies?**

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### **Abstract**

Many school children have been subjected to traumatic experiences in school that have significantly effected their social adjustment in the classroom setting and their overall psychological and emotional status. The literature generally considers school victims to be bullied by peers, however, it has been demonstrated that some trauma to students in schools involves teachers and other school personnel (Hyman & Snook, 2000). Temple University, USA, have initiated a cross – national study to explore student victimization by educators and peers with emphasis on intra and inter-sample aspects of the types of traumatic stressors experienced by students. The goal of this study is to extend our knowledge of school trauma beyond a basic understanding of specific situations and locations to a more comprehensive and global view of the types of traumas experienced by children at school.

### ***Peer Bullying in Schools***

Bullying refers to the abusive treatment of a person by means of force or coercion. It is aggressive behaviour that is repeated over time, is intentionally harmful and occurs without provocation (Olweus, 1991 in Harris & Petrie, 2002). It is a term frequently used in the school context especially when referring to the behaviour of school children, which is where one child is said to be bullying another child. Bullying may be physical such as hitting, punching, and spitting or it may involve language that is browbeating using verbal assault, teasing, ridicule, sarcasm, and scapegoating. Boys tend to use direct bullying with behaviours such as teasing, hitting, or using a weapon whereas girls typically use more indirect behaviours such as spreading rumours, ignoring or excluding others intentionally or influencing others to do these things. Clearly this range of behaviours may result in emotional and/or physical maltreatment which, according to Harris and Petrie (2002) can become insurmountable barriers for children in making positive connections with other students, their teachers and school administration.

Bullying involves a minimum of two people; one is the perpetrator and the other the victim. However, a larger number of people may be involved in an indirect manner, as an audience. These bystanders may be other students who witness the bullying event but remain uninvolved. They are frequently afraid of becoming the next victim if they do interfere. They often feel powerless, and have a loss of self-respect and self-confidence (Hazler, 1996 in Harris & Petrie, 2002).

Numerous surveys of students have found that bullying by peers in school is a frequent experience for many children (Genta, Menesini, Fonzi, Costabile, & Smith, 1996; Kumpulainen et al., 1998; Whitney & Smith, 1993). One in six children report being bullied at least once a week (Rigby, 1997; Zubrick et al., 1997) although that figure was as high as 50% if the duration of the bullying is taken as lasting only one week (Smith & Shu, 2000). Forty percent of adolescents reported having been bullied at some time during their schooling (Mynard, Joseph & Alexander, 2000). However,

the percentage of students who have reported longer term bullying of 6 months or more decreases to 15-17% (Slee, 1995; Slee & Rigby, 1993).

There is a higher incidence of reported bullying by peers in primary than in secondary schools (Rigby, 1997; Rigby & Slee, 1991) and most studies have shown that boys and girls report similar levels of victimisation (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Smith & Shu, 2000). However, some studies report more boys being bullied than girls (Hazler, Hoover, & Oliver, 1992; Rigby, 1997; Rigby & Slee, 1991).

Further, research has shown that there are different kinds of bullying which are often gender specific. For example, physical bullying has been shown to be more prevalent among younger children than older (Whitney & Smith, 1993) and boys identify being more overtly physically bullied than girls (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001). Girls report more relational victimisation, socially hurtful behaviours, exclusion and teasing (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Owens, Shute & Slee, 2000). Verbal bullying has also been shown to be a significant form of peer victimisation in schools (Whitney & Smith, 1993).

### ***Adult Bullying in Schools***

Recently, bullying by adults has become recognised as an important issue (Smith, Singer, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003). Most research on adult bullying behaviour has been carried out in the workplace with studies involving mental health workers (Stein, Hoosen, Brooks, Haigh & Christie, 2002), prison officers (Vartia & Hyyti, 2002), civil servants (Lee, 2002) and nurses (Quine, 2001). However, there has been a scarcity of research with teachers. Not only would it seem in hierarchal bureaucracies such as schools, that there may be workplace bullying amongst adults, there may also be bullying of students by teachers.

Hyman and colleagues in the United States have been investigating victimisation of students by school staff (Hyman & Perone, 1998). They found that the majority of students experience verbal maltreatment by teachers at some time in their school life (Hyman & Weiler, 1994; Hyman, Zelikoff, & Clarke, 1988). Students surveyed reported that they had experienced varying degrees of stress as a result of maltreatment by educators (Hyman & Snook, 2000). Olweus (1996) also found that 10% of a sample of 5,100 Norwegian elementary and junior high school teachers overtly bullied one or more students on a regular basis. Fifty percent of victimised high school students surveyed in the United States identified bullying by an educator as their worst school experience, while the others identified a peer as the perpetrator (Snook, 2001). In addition, fifty-one percent of high school students with learning disabilities reported that teachers caused their worst experience in school with only 23% saying it was a peer who was involved (Aldrete-Phan, 2002). Investigation of victimisation of pupils by Israeli school staff revealed that almost a quarter of secondary school students reported emotional maltreatment by a staff member, while almost a fifth reported being a victim of physical maltreatment from a teacher (Benbenishty, Zeira & Astor, 2002). Primary students in Israel reported a higher incidence of maltreatment by staff, with almost a third reporting emotional maltreatment by teachers during the previous month with more than a fifth reporting physical maltreatment (Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor & Khoury-Kassabri, 2002). Further, results of a survey in Greece indicated that although peers were most involved in student victimisation, teacher involvement was significant (Petropoulos & Papastilianou, 2001 cited in Halkias et al., 2003). The important finding in this study was that any bullying or bad experience involving a teacher was perceived as far more hurtful than bullying by a peer.

According to Hyman and Snook (1999), for the past several decades schools in the USA have adhered to a variety of punitive disciplinary strategies that have the potential to cause severe damage to the mental health of some students. They maintain that teachers' use of activities such as time-out, preventing students from going to the toilet, the use of sarcastic remarks and corporal punishment not only violate student's civil rights but also alienate students from school and can result in their psychological harm. They go further by suggesting that when students experience these practices as traumatic events, they experience emotions such as anger, hostility and aggression which may in turn lead to these students engaging in destructive behaviours. Another consequence for students, as a result of these behaviours by teachers, can be Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Some observers of modern American public schools maintain that character and purpose are less evident in contemporary schools and those in authority within them are allowed to act in ways that remain legal but are clearly not ethical or moral, such as strip-searching students (DiGuilio, 2001). Corporal punishment, which has not been allowed in Queensland state schools since 1995, continues as a legal response to school rule breakers in many states in the USA as well as in many nations. According to DiGuilio (2001) the use of corporal punishment is one of the best examples where schools can be viewed as oppressive environments.

DiGuilio (2001) maintains that in the context of the contemporary classroom it is possible that teachers may be inadvertently enabling stronger, aggressive behaviour by being less inclined than teachers in the past to respond strongly towards aggressive student behaviour (through physical restraint, punishment, and strong words) therefore giving tacit permission for aggressive behaviour including bullying. Teachers nowadays may be more inclined to have students work it out for themselves rather than rely on teacher intervention. This situation places the less aggressive child at increased risk of being bullied. In fact, it is possible that in society at large, what were once unwritten, shared agreements and understandings of what acceptable public behaviour is have now been rewritten by actors, politicians and athletes who actively model and advocate strong, aggressive, antisocial behaviours.

In retrospective surveys, 60-86% of adult subjects claimed to have had a traumatic school experience involving teachers (Zelikoff & Hyman, 1987). In another recent retrospective survey utilising "My Worst School Experience Scale" with university students in Greece, educators were reported by 49% of respondents to have caused their worst school experience, with peers causing 30% (Halkias et al., 2003). According to records from the Queensland Department of Education, (Education Queensland, 2003) corporal punishment in Queensland state schools was a constant problem for educational administrators from the inception of the Queensland system of education in 1860 to the abolition of corporal punishment in 1995. While the law did not change to any great extent during those years, the regulations of the Department of Education progressively restricted the use of corporal punishment. Until the 1970's, the consensus of opinion in the Queensland educational field was that corporal punishment was a necessary evil to be used as a last resort. The consensus of public opinion accepted this viewpoint, with discontent directed mainly at violations of the regulations. In Queensland in 1992 a decision was made to phase out the use of corporal punishment in state schools over the following three years. This was due to the increased support by teachers and parents for the total abolition of corporal punishment in schools and also as corporal punishment had become incompatible with the policies of the Department and the Government of the day. Therefore, at the beginning of the 1995 school year, corporal punishment in Queensland state schools was abolished (Education Queensland, 2003).

Currently corporal punishment is still legal in a number of states in the USA, as well as in many other countries, where schools continue to use it as a method of

enforcing student discipline. Because of this it is possible that a different pattern of victimization and subsequent possible trauma will be evident for students who have been educated since 1992 in Queensland state schools when corporal punishment was beginning to be phased out compared with students who have been educated in systems where corporal punishment is still legal. Current Queensland fourth year undergraduate students who entered the university straight from school would have been ten years old or younger in 1992 and would not have experienced corporal punishment, if they attended a state school in Queensland, as much as older students such as mature age entrants to universities who were probably still at school when it was still legal to use corporal punishment in Queensland schools. Possibly they might show a different pattern of response from the younger students who were in schools after it became illegal to employ corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure.

This study is part of a cross-national study designed to examine the victimization of students. It was initiated by Professor Irwin Hyman from the National Center for the Study of Corporal Punishment and Alternatives (NCSCPA), Temple University, Philadelphia. Professor Hyman has authored a number of books on the general topics of bullying in schools and disciplining children as well as writing numerous papers in the area. The NCSCPA has conducted research and also consults about physical and emotional maltreatment of students, and about school discipline and school violence. In recent years they have undertaken cross-national studies similar in structure to the current study on similar though different topics. A previous cross-national study investigated differences in parental discipline practices.

One of the specific research questions for this cross-national study

Are there significant differences within and between countries between the nature and extent of stress symptoms caused by educators as compared to peer victimization?

It is envisaged that the sample for this cross-national study will consist of convenience samples of approximately two hundred and fifty university students selected from each country. Members of various psychological associations were invited to participate in the study through their organizations' professional newsletters. Countries participating in the current study so far include the USA, Turkey, Greece and Venezuela as well as Australia. For this study the participants will be between the ages of 18-25 years, with approximately equal proportions of males and females.

The Australian representatives in this project are currently from Queensland universities including Griffith University (GU) and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). Results will be collated and analysed from a variety of possible perspectives including – 1) the Griffith University perspective, 2) the Griffith University and Queensland University of Technology perspective, and 3) the cross-national perspective using responses from each participating country. The purpose of the current study is to identify if students attending Griffith and Queensland University believe they were victimized when they were at school and if they were to determine if it was by other students and /or by teachers. It will also attempt to identify if the victimization has resulted in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder for any students.

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